THE GRACE TO RECEIVE

December 28, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:1-12

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" --Romans 11:33 (RSV)

There is a wonderful paragraph in Thomas Hardy's, The Return of the Native, on the subject of churchgoing at Christmas. Hardy wrote:

"In an ordinary village or country town one can safely calculate that, either on Christmas day or the Sunday contiguous, any native home for the holidays, who has not through age or ennui lost the appetite for seeing and being seen, will turn up in some pew or other, shining with hope, self-consciousness, and new clothes. Thus the congregation on Christmas morning is mostly a Tussaud collection of celebrities who have been born in the neighborhood."

So, here we are: collection of neighborhood celebrities - at least some of you- shining with new clothes, seeing old friends...and how good and pleasant it is.

But there is something else on the agenda this day. In fact, theologically it is one of my favorites, along with the Sunday after Easter. To be sure, there is a sense of let down, or relief. We actually made it, fought the fight and ran the race: actually bought and wrapped all the presents, addressed the cards, baked the cookies, trimmed the tree, sang the songs, attended the parties, ate and drank far too much. The date to which we have been pointing with fidelity and intense devotion came and went last Thursday. And here we are, in the aftermath, not only relieved, but with some burden of responsibility resting on those of us who believe the feast represents something more than a year end festival, to say or do something - by way of response, somehow to come up, at least with a respectable "thank you" for instance.

Elementary good manners dictate that gratitude be expressed when one receives a gift. One of the very first social niceties we teach our children is to say "thank you." It's more than social grace, of course. The hope is that people who know to say "thank you" will also learn the experience, the feeling of gratitude: in fact, will come to exhibit a life position which is gracious, open to gifts from others, receptive to other

people and what they have to offer and want to give, a life that knows how to be a gracious receiver, that knows how very much of life is a gift, and that to live it one must, in a sense, know gratitude.

Yet sometimes, when we are given a particularly generous gift, or a particularly unexpected gift, our cultivated graciousness disappears and we say something like "Oh, you shouldn't have - you really shouldn't have done that - that wasn't necessary."

We have all been guilty of that momentary lapse, perhaps fairly recently. You may have said something like that a mere 72 hours ago. Some of us do it habitually. You know people, and so do I, to whom it is virtually impossible to give a gift, or even to pay a compliment. "The meal was wonderful - Oh, it was nothing: Congratulations! - Lot's of people could have done it: You look great - I'd look better if I lost 10 pounds." I've caught myself doing that, and I have concluded that "you shouldn't have" is one of the most graceless things we can say to one another. Who, after all, wants to be told that he shouldn't feel what he feels and should not express how he feels. Professor Fred Craddock asks how it would feel to receive a thank you note that read as follows - "Dear Mary: Thanks for the gift, but I want you to know that I didn't need it. In fact, I don't need anything. Sincerely yours, John." That is exactly what we say to one another on occasion.

I suggest that what appears to be a minor social faux pas, may be indicative of a major spiritual problem: that our occasional inability to deal with a generous and unexpected gift may say something about our ability or willingness to be recipients of that gift which we have spent a month anticipating, the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Let's explore it for a minute. What is it that motivates us sometime to respond to generosity with the presumptuous suggestion that we know better than the giver what he or she should have done and that, besides, the gift wasn't necessary - which means we don't want it, or don't want to deal with it, or don't want to deal with the giver?

Perhaps we don't like gifts. The simple fact is that we do. We like surprises. Part of the universal appeal of Christmas is the promise of receiving and giving unexpected presents. Part of the lovely anticipation for me is that Santa is not usually limited by the mundane ordinariness of my list, but comes up with unexpected and wonderful surprises. In fact, there is something deep within us, I believe, that watches and waits for novelty. Philosopher Sam Keen wrote about it in his book Apology for Wonder in a paragraph I think about nearly every morning of my life. He wrote: "Unless we are exceptionally gifted with a strong propensity to wonder, life easily becomes stale and boring. We long for a surprise that will bring refreshment and novelty. A touch of this love of the surprising is probably seen in the expectation with which we wait for the morning mail. Who knows what will come?" (Apology for Wonder, p. 28-29). I do that. Even though the reality will be bills and advertisements, I watch for the mail.

We do like gifts.

Perhaps it is that receiving a gift makes us feel indebted to the giver and carries with it the responsibility to reciprocate. An unexpected gift means your own gift list expands. To receive a Christmas card often means adding another name to your own list. Sometimes I muse that if everyone thought that way, the law of mathematic probabilities would soon require that everyone in the world be on everyone else's Christmas card list. Russell Baker has a funny piece in the New York Times Magazine this morning about the round-robin dynamics of reciprocal dinner invitations.

There is serious theology here - and serious psychology. Paul Tournier, in his excellent book Guilt & Grace, wrote a chapter, "Everything Must Be Paid For." Tournier, a physician, counselor and theologian, wondered why so few Christians seemed free, confident and joyous after 20 centuries of the church talking about the free gift of Salvation. He concluded that the reason is "a deep psychological attitude, the idea deeply engraved in the heart - that everything must be paid for." (Guilt & Grace, p. 174).

Tournier observed the presence of this motif in all religion. In his medical practice he observed the great difficulty many people have believing that they are acceptable to other people. He quoted a patient who responded to Dr. Tournier's assurances that others accepted him, that God accepted him by saying, "But that's too easy." Tournier believed that many illnesses resulted from individuals trying to pay off a sense of indebtedness. He wrote, " It's a form of punishment which the sufferer administers to himself, and it goes on repeating itself indefinitely with a kind of inexorable fatality." (p. 175)

We do like to receive gifts, but when we feel that receiving places us in debt to the giver, we deal with it by saying: "You shouldn't have - that wasn't necessary."

The reverse is true. If receiving a gift places us in debt, then giving can make us the beneficiary of someone else's indebtedness. Advertising sometimes comes right out and says it. "How can she resist, if you give her diamonds? He'll do what you wish if you give him a watch." And those are the only conditions in which "you shouldn't have done it" is the appropriate thing to say. It may be more blessed to give than to receive, but it's certainly easier to feel smug than to feel grateful to someone who is trying to manipulate you.

"You shouldn't have done it" may, of course, be an accurate description of how we feel about ourselves. We may respond that way because we feel truly undeserving, or are undeserving. A friend of mine took time off from work to attend a national church meeting. He was conservative in dress, life style, political outlook. His assigned seat was beside a young woman who was dramatically opposite to him, a single mother, with her child with her, constantly interrupting the order of the meeting, her dress and life style: mostly counter-culture, her political opinions way out in left field, at least by his criteria. Over the course of the several day meeting, he had expressed his displeasure to her in many ways. As often happens at these gatherings, there was a closing communion, and when it came time to pass the peace, she said - "I know that you don't approve of me and don't like me and I'm sorry about that.. I really wish to

give you the gift of peace of Jesus Christ." He didn't deserve that and he knew it, and it was such a moving experience that he talked about it for months and even wore a "God Loves You & So Do I" button to Rotary.

Sometimes we don't deserve the gift. And sometimes there is a deeper crisis, a permanent poverty of the spirit, a terrible lack of self esteem, an inability to know that anyone could love us. Sometimes - all of us - have difficulty believing that anyone could care for us, be affectionate to us. Sometimes we simply can't cope with and don't understand that someone can love us for who we are, accept us as we are, like to look at us, be with us, give gifts to us for the simple joy the giver receives. Sometimes that is utterly incomprehensible to us. Sometimes our opinion of ourselves is so low that we are confessing something very painful and intimate when we say "You shouldn't have done that." It is so deep within us that sometimes we cannot receive the gift because it would contradict our feelings of unworthiness.

And sometimes we are not able to be gracious recipients because there is a sense in which the giver always comes in the gift. We must deal, not simply with the object, but with the caring and love of the other person. There are times when we would rather not do that, when we would prefer to stay at arm's length and not get too close. "You shouldn't have done that" really means "You shouldn't have come this close. I shouldn't be opening myself to you."

In retrospect, I often wonder with a bit of regret - what parents mean, when they take small children Christmas shopping, tell them what to buy, give them the money, manage the whole process and then without really intending it - dismiss as meaningless the treasures over which a child has been slaving at school for weeks. The home-made card, with misshapen nativity and misspelled message contains the person, in a way the slick Hallmark never can: the popsicle stick pencil holder is still around long after the socks and handkerchiefs have been gone and forgotten. What a good lesson to learn to deal with the person in these gifts.

And perhaps we think we don't need gifts. Perhaps we believe that misguided bit of cultural folk voodoo that suggests that independence, autonomy, self reliance are the psychological goals to which we should aspire, so that ideally we need no one and want no thing. How limiting it is intellectually when we fail to discover somewhere along the line - that there is a lot of knowledge and wisdom out there that others are in a position to give us. How restrictive not to know one's own intellectual limits. How limiting when we can learn nothing. The best and most enriching education is the one that instills respect and modesty before the knowledge and wisdom I do not have yet, the otherness of the whole body of knowledge, art, music, and literature which is not mine, but someone else's to give to me as a gift. How sad to be closed to the gift of learning from others.

"You shouldn't have done that," we say on occasion and what we mean to say is:

I don't want to feel indebted -

I don't deserve your gift -

I don't want to deal with you -

I don't need anything/I don't need you.

The Gospel of Christmas is the announcement that a gift has been given; a most extravagant gift. In fact, we have not done anything to deserve this gift. We have not earned it. This gift is given out of the extravagant love of God. The incredible suggestion of Christianity is that it gives God pleasure to give this gift. The name for it is grace. It is expressed, perhaps most completely, simply and eloquently in the birth of Jesus Christ. And what a Christian Christmas ought to be is an utterly joyful and grateful celebration. Yet it is just here, where the Christian faith is at its simplest, and clearest - gift giving and grateful response - that many of us stumble. "That's too easy: there must be a catch to it, some conditions attached to the good news. Surely we have to do something to receive God's love. Surely you don't mean that it is without obligation." Tournier observed, "The very people who long most arduously for grace have the greatest difficulty accepting it." And Professor Craddock quips - "It may be more blessed to give than to receive, but it is also a whale of a lot easier."

I have always been intrigued with the fact that throughout his career, Karl Barth - arguably the most influential Christian thinker in this century - used to go to the Basel jail on Sunday morning to lead worship. His sermons, preached to the prisoners, were frequently on grace. In one of them he said:

"Is it not a pity that we rebel against this very truth in the depth of our hearts? Indeed we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace, and by grace alone. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." (Good News to the Captives, p. 40). What a wonderful image and what an appropriate posture for those who know that they have been blessed by an amazing grace - the child overwhelmed by the gifts given.

"O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways," our first serious theologian declared. St. Paul, near the end of his life, writing a theological position paper to introduce himself to the believers in the city of Rome, penned an elaborate and at times almost exasperatingly complex exposition of the Gospel, The Letter to the Romans. In it he deals with every objection, every argument against the faith he can think of. And throughout, the adhesive that keeps it together - the great, great mystery which rendered even Paul speechless - was the grace of God, the undeserved and unearned good will of God, the mercy of God's response to people who disobey, or are careless, callous, indifferent, and ungrateful. The consistent mystery is the amazing grace of God's love in Jesus Christ.

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?" Paul asked, "or who has given a gift to Him that he might be repaid?"

No one obviously. God is the giver. We are the recipients. In Barth's unforgettable image, "Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child." (Ibid, p. 39)

The very essence of this matter, this church business, this institutional religion that can become so elaborate, so structured, so properly dignified, and solemnly orthodox, sometimes so pompous and so silly - the essence of it is a gift - an extravagant and undeserved gift.

The essence of the matter is that it is a gift we need. If you asked a secular sociologist, or psychologist what we need to be whole human beings, the answers would probably be that we need love, security, freedom; that they are connected - that without these, people are a lot less than they could be. The goodness of the good news is that we need the love of the God who created us in order to be fully human. We need the security God's love gives in order to be fully loving in our relationships. We need the freedom from fear God's love gives in order to live intentionally and joyfully.

The essence of the matter is a gift given. And the task of believing, of being a Christian, of living as a disciple - begins with the gracious reception of this gift and the gratitude it calls forth.

Christmas, slightly faded this morning, but not yet gone, is the gift given and the personal response, a thank you to God.

A Scottish poet, George MacDonald, wrote, "For the real good of every gift it is essential, first, that the giver be in the gift - as God always is - and next, that the receiver know and receive the giver in the gift."

That is the potential whenever we give gifts: not just objects transferred, ownership changed - but persons offered and accepted in new and living relationships. And that potential is in the very air at Christmas.

A gift has been given

unto us, a child has been born,

and his name is Emmanuel -

God with us.

It is the selfhood of God - the reality and personhood of God offered in Jesus Christ. It is a gift. It is always unexpected. It is never deserved. It is for everyone - everyone who knows how to receive. It is our salvation.

Amen.